

Political Violence Report

March 2007

TERROR NETWORKS AND SACRED VALUES

Synopsis of report from

Madrid – Morocco – Hamburg – Palestine – Israel – Syria

Delivered to NSC staff, White House, Wednesday, March 28, 2007, 4 pm

by Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod and Richard Davis

(co-principal researcher, Marc Sageman, was not at the meeting but represented)

A Scientific Approach

The facts detailed in this briefing are the results of scientific exploration of terror networks and sacred values and their association to political violence. The research is sponsored by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (AFSOR) and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

This report combines the results of 3 research projects. Robert Axelrod (University of Michigan) and Richard Davis (Davis Energy Incorporated) are consultants.

1. U.S. Department of Defense, Air Force Office Scientific Research, “Small Group Dynamics in the Evolution of Global Network Terrorism: A Comprehensive, People-Based Approach,” PI, Scott Atran, Co-PI, Marc Sageman (Sageman Associates).
2. National Science Foundation (Contract No. SBE-0527396), “Sacred Values in Decision Making and Cultural Conflict,” PI - Scott Atran (University of Michigan), Co-PIs: Douglas Medin (Northwestern University), Jeremy Ginges (New School for Social Research).
3. U.S. Department of Defense, Air Force Office Scientific Research, “Computational Models for Belief Revision, Group Decisions, and Cultural Shifts,” MURI Award, PI - Whitman Richards (MIT), Subcontract to Scott Atran (John Jay College of Criminal Justice).

Terror Networks Research Objective. Principal investigators are Scott Atran and Marc Sageman.

How do terrorists become radicalized? What motivates them? Who supports them? Who among them is most liable to defect? We don’t have reliable answers to these vital questions because of a lack of relevant data. Several extensive terrorist databases do currently exist. But they are incident-based catalogs of terrorist names and events: who, what, where, and when. Conspicuously absent is *why*.

To this end, Sageman and Atran are assembling a people-based database focusing on the complexities of people, rather than incidents, as a better way to understand and predict terrorist behavior. Our database comprises two parts. The first is a detailed categorization of basic biographical and socioeconomic information, including nationality, ethnicity, occupation, and religious upbringing. The second addresses the vast network of connections—the glue that holds the diverse array of terrorists together—and includes data on acquaintances, family ties, friendships, and venues for terrorist training. Such an approach is crucial, since growth of global terrorism increasingly appears to be largely a decentralized, evolutionary process. And, as in any natural evolutionary process, individual variation and environmental context are the critical determinants of future directions and paths.

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We have very stringent criteria for entering data into the database. Lowest reliability is given to media accounts and analyses based on secondary sources. Highest reliability is given to court testimony that has been cross-examined because this most closely approximates peer review in science, and to sources with direct and high level access (for example if independently confirmed directly to us by a former intelligence agent and a jihadi operative).

Our preliminary analysis of more than one thousand entries indicates that small group dynamics (rather than personality, ideology, education or income) is the prime factor in deciding which few, among millions of potential jihadis, will actually go on to commit violence.

But as background to understanding which groups to focus on, and what aspects of interpersonal relationships are likely to be most relevant, we first do background investigations of social networks and neighborhoods associated with terrorist events.

Recently, we began to directly relate court data to two field sites associated with European terrorist cells, Madrid (March 11, 2004 bombing) and Hamburg (September 11, 2001 bombings):

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Madrid

Sageman and Atran went to the trials of the Madrid Bombings earlier this month. We were the only researchers present and there were no government officials from any other country than Spain. The trial, which represents the worst terrorist case in modern European history, is noteworthy for the seeming ordinariness of the defendants (few of whom claim to be Salafis or even religious) and the dullness of the prosecution (assigned to the case by rotation in routine scheduling and seemingly unprepared for the main prosecution witness, the former substitute Imam of the Villaverde mosque, codename Cartagena, coming to court to refute much of his prior testimony to authorities as having been coerced). The court also lacks translators familiar with Moroccan Arabic or Berber, and so much evidence from witnesses comes across confused.

After hearing the main witnesses for the prosecution, we went to Tetuan, a town in Morocco where one of the two main groups of Madrid Bombers grew up. We talked with police and people in the community.

- 5 of the 7 Madrid Train Bombers who blew themselves when cornered by Spanish police grew up in one section of the Jamaa Mezuak neighborhood of Tetuan. 3 had reputations as being religious (brothers Rachid and Mohamed Oulad Akcha and Abdennabi Kounjaa), one was a notorious drug smuggler (Jamal Ahmidan, who became the operational chief of the Madrid bombing) and one (Asri Rifaat Anouar) was a non religious a seller of candies who looked up to the others (especially to Ahmidan, according to his own father and others).
 - From the testimony of Jamal Ahmidan's wife (a Christian woman who had met Jamal in 1992 at the age of 14), Ahmidan, although always vociferously anti-Semitic, did not show any jihadi tendencies even after his return to Madrid from prison in Morocco (July 29, 2003).
 - The Spanish government's chief police investigator told Marc Sageman in Canberra that Mohamed Oulad Akcha facilitated contact between Ahmidan and the new substitute Imam of the Villaverde mosque, Serhane Fakheth, a Tunisian student who had been preaching jihad ever since he met up with Syrian Islamist Imam Eddin Barakat Yarkas (aka Abu Dahdah who may have had links to Al Qaeda) and Amer Azizi (a Moroccan who trained for Jihad in Afghanistan) around the year 2000. (Note that Yarkas was imprisoned shortly after 9-11 and Azizi fled the country).
 - Although the group (mostly students) around Serhane had been talking about jihad for several years, Serhane's intense friendship with the hands-on Ahmidan – and not any relationship with Al Qaeda or Qaeda-inspired groups – triggered concrete plans for action, beginning in September 2003.
 - According to Cartagena, at one informal get together before Ahmidan came on the scene, Serhane asked everyone who was ready to become a martyr to raise their hands. Everyone did, including Cartagena. "But," says Cartagena, "I never intended to be a martyr and I thought that what was said at these meetings would never be more than words, though I did tell the authorities about them." (Records show that the authorities did not respond to Cartagena's report about this particular meeting because it was phoned in on a weekend.)

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- Mezuak, a neighborhood of 19,000 people, is relatively poor, with many unemployed youth, and with a majority of “traditional” Muslims and a relatively small population of “Salafis” (often recognizable by dress, women in occasional full black Burqa and men with skull cap and untrimmed beard).
- It is believed by the Moroccan authorities that a number of suicide bombers in Iraq have come from Mezuak; Moroccan authorities have confirmed several from DNA provided by U.S. authorities.
- From interviews in the neighborhood we confirmed four soccer buddies who blew themselves up in Iraq.
- Children we interviewed in the neighborhood (including the youngest Oulad Akcha children who live next to the Al Rohbane mosque) aspire to be either Osama Bin Laden or a soccer star like Ronaldinho. The youngest boy in front of the Oulad Akcha house (around 6 years old), said he wanted someday to have money for a bicycle to ride around the neighborhood or for an airplane to fly into the White House.
- People who know the neighborhood say that the Chicago Café, and not the Rohbane mosque, was the main setting where the Madrid bombers and Iraq-bound suicide bombers used to hang out. There is nothing particularly religious or unseemly about it.
- Despite claims in the press and in government circles, we heard of no concrete evidence whatever of an Al Qaeda connection to the Madrid bombings or to the pipeline of suicide bombers going from Tetuan to Iraq via Spain and Syria.
- According to local informants,
 - The money for the Tetuan-Iraq pipeline originates locally. Reputable businessmen give zakat (charity) to local groups, one of them headed by Tariq Oulad Akcha.
 - The cost of getting a suicide bomber from Tetuan to Iraq is about 6,000 euros.
 - This international network is apparently self organizing. A young person from Mezuak is given the name of someone in Sebta (the Spanish enclave of Ceuta). Money is passed on to handlers connected with, or riding piggyback on, the widespread contraband and drug trafficking that is peculiar to Tetuan and Ceuta (about 25,000 people cross daily from Tetuan into Ceuta without passports).
 - Contraband and drug trafficking are integral to Tetuan’s economy and even its social fabric, and authorities will not stop it.
 - Barcelona is a possible a transit point, where there is also a growing Pakistani jihadi community involved in bombing plots in Spain and perhaps elsewhere in Europe. This is a possibility that should be looked into.
 - The pipeline seems to resemble the traditional Silk Road that allowed commerce between China and Western Europe for many centuries, where persons at place A would send on merchandise to relatives or other confidants at place B, who in turn would send on or exchange the merchandise to other relatives and confidants at place C, and so on.. Understanding the self generation and maintenance of these networks is a new theoretical challenge for us.

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Hamburg

After our visit to Tetuan, we went to Hamburg to interview government officials, community leaders with knowledge of the Hamburg cell. We work closely with those who have interviewed family and friends of the Hamburg cell. We interviewed the Imam and substitute Imam at the Al Quds mosque.

- Dirk Laabs, a documentary film maker, reporter and consultant on our project who has spent that last 5 years interviewing police investigators and friends and family of the Hamburg cell surmised: “the Hamburg cell did not arise from the community in which its members lived, it could have been almost anywhere, any city in Europe. They were not integrated into the community but withdrew from it to live in a parallel universe of Jihad.”
- The neighborhood where the Hamburg plotters lived is typically German middle class. Germans call it a “*spießer*” neighborhood, meaning very prim and proper. The nearby technical university is small and rather friendly.
- Neighbors report that 3 of the Hamburg cell, Mohamed Atta, Marwan al Shehi and Ramzi Omar Binalshibh, holed themselves up for several months and the apartment stank. They moved out with about 20 mattresses. This resembles the Takfiris in Egypt who similarly made their houses for “fellow travelers” in imitation of the lifestyle of the Prophet and his disciples.
- Friends of the Hamburg plotters say that Binalshibh, not Atta, was the natural leader of the group and that Shehi was also far more amicable than Atta and able to bring people into the jihadi fold.
- The Hamburg plotters would go from their apartments by subway to one of 3 mosques: Al Quds, An Nur, Al Muhajrin, all within a few blocks of one another, but would have to pass a row of sex shops to get to them and this is known to have disturbed their religious sensibilities.
- Al Quds mosque, known as the Moroccan mosque (we visited the sister Ad Dakhla mosque in Tangiers where Mohamed Fizazi also preached) is a small nondescript structure with a bare second story prayer room and a third floor halal food shop, cafeteria, barber shop (where many of the youth hang out) and a set of 5 outdated computers. About 150 people out of Hamburg’s Moroccan community of 1500-2000 pray at Al Quds on Fridays.
- When asked about violence, Al Qud’s substitute Imam, a Moroccan, told us a parable: there were two rams, one with horns and one without. The one with horns butted his head against the defenseless one. In the next world, Allah switched the horns from one ram to the other, so justice could prevail.
- The substitute Imam told us Muslims always seek peace, and when a Muslim kills another the presumption is that he was provoked.
- The Imam, a non bearded man from the Ivory Coast, continued: All Muslims now feel despair. Islam ruled the world, but Muslims had fallen onto hard times lately and Islam is under attack.
- The Imam told us that Muslims can respond to this in one of 3 ways: change the system from without and use violence to do it; change society from within, through the democratic way (but people of the first category tell people in the second that they just don’t have the numbers and are wasting their time); or accept the world as it is at present, and wait for God to change it.
- The Hamburg plotters spent a good deal of time at the nearby Lades restaurant (which seems to be a place to meet similar to the Chicago café in Mezuak).
- Hamburg (and the suburb of Harburg where the plotters lived) has no apparent advantage or disadvantage over other European cities in terms of harboring terrorists.

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Sacred Values Research Objective

Using the experimental paradigm we developed under the NSF and AFOSR funding we met with the political leaders in the Middle East from Syria, Palestine and Israel to see how sacred values impact regional tensions and conflict.

We went to the region to explore findings from previous surveys among Israeli settlers, Palestinian refugees and Hamas versus non Hamas (to be published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A.). These findings suggest that people are often willing to compromise on what is really important to them if they believe the other side has compromised on something they hold dear.

On our recent trip (2/21 to 3/3/07) we asked Palestinian and Israeli leaders our three questions, and then drew them out on their answers. Our base-line question for the Palestinians was "If, in the future conditions were met, would you be willing to recognize Israel?" The variants were "if the US guaranteed one billion dollars to help rebuild Palestine?" and "if the Israel's apologized for the Naqba [the 1947-48 flight of Palestinians]" Analogous questions were asked of Israeli leaders.

Responses were quite consistent with our previous findings, with one important difference. In our original surveys people with sacred values responded "No," to the proposed tradeoff, "No + emotional outrage and increased support for violence" to the same tradeoff coupled with a substantial and credible material incentive, and "Yes perhaps" to tradeoffs that also involve symbolic concessions (of no material benefit) from the other side; however, leaders responded "No," "No," and "Yes but" in the sense that the symbolic concession was not enough in itself but only the necessary condition to opening serious negotiations involving material issues as well.

Our research indicates that "sacred" issues must be addressed prior to material solutions becoming substantive in peace negotiations. This was particularly evident when, on the issue of "Right of Return," Musa Abu Marzouk (former chairman, and current deputy chairman, of Hamas) said "No" to the tradeoff for peace without granting a right of return, a more emphatic "No, we do not sell ourselves for any amount" when given a tradeoff with a substantial material incentive (credible offering of substantial US aid for the rebuilding of Palestinian infrastructure), and "yes, an apology is important, but only as a beginning, it's not enough because our houses and land were taken away from us and something has to be done about that." Similarly, Binyamin Netanyahu (former Israeli prime minister and current opposition leader in parliament) responded to our question, "Would you seriously consider accepting a two state solution following the 1967 borders if all major Palestinian factions, including Hamas, were to recognize the right of the Jewish people to an independent state in the region?" with the answer: "Yes, but the Palestinians would have to show they sincerely mean it, change their textbooks and anti-Semitic characterizations and then allow some border adjustments so that shoulder-fired missiles couldn't hit our commercial planes as they land in Tel Aviv."

Since many of the senior people we met had never posed the questions quite the way that we did, we often got thoughtful answers rather than only clichés. Drawing people out we learned a good deal about how they approached various issues, including the proposed unity government.